The Disgraced Life in J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*

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> …I levelled
> And blew the small hour through his heart.
> Ian Duhig, "The Lammas Hireling"

There is an inherent tension between literature and psychoanalysis as distinct but overlapping perspectives on inwardness. It is important that we credit the specificity of these two perspectives, while at the same time exploring the potential for productive overlap. By "overlap" I mean those occasions when two relatively autonomous forms of understanding intersect, usually, on account of a common problem or theme, if not a comparable attitude towards a given problem. In this essay, I present a close reading of J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* along these lines, with respect to the "inner workings" of narrative fiction, on the one hand, and to the overlap between psychoanalysis and literature in Coetzee's defining preoccupation with the "psychic" deformations of violence and brutality, on the other (Coetzee, 1987, 2007a). I do not propose to define "inwardness" in the abstract. The essay is presented as a literary-critical reconstruction of a particular attitude towards the inner life rather than a general philosophical argument.

Coetzee is not in any meaningful sense of the word a "psychological" novelist. The interior life is presented in his novels as the cumulative effect of so many discursive configurations or language games. This interplay of process and patterning, which comes to the fore in Coetzee's various forms of self-referential storytelling, includes the internal configuration of anxiety, which I treat in the colonial context, as a type of religious anxiety. In particular, I identify the inner workings of violence, in this historical and political context, with the horror of aloneness, an ineradicable sense of longing in the absence of God. Of course, the

predicament of living a disgraced, forsaken life is hardly confined to the characters in Coetzee's novels. My aim is to demonstrate the extent to which Coetzee is centrally concerned with a wider formation of interiority, a modern inner life haunted by an intolerable nothingness.

I. Mythography

Coetzee's first work of fiction, *Dusklands*, published in South African in 1974, comprises two novellas: "The Vietnam Project" and "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee." The stories are linked by the prevalence of a certain narrative voice, an inner articulation of despair coupled with a delirious longing for salvation. The combined sense of despair and longing involves a paranoid setup in which the act of saving is inextricably linked to annihilation. Set out initially in these two stories, the persecutory arrangement of despair and longing may be seen as the central predicament in Coetzee's novels. Writing out of their separate fates, as Coetzee puts it in the postscript to *Elizabeth Costello* (2003, p. 230), the characters in his novels, past and present, give voice to a wish for salvation alongside a realization of their damnation. In *Dusklands*, this setup reveals itself explicitly as a formation of nihilism, an abortive gulf or blankness above which defensive patterns of movement continue to unfold.

Starting with "The Vietnam Project," the text consists of a confessional, autobiographical narrative by an expert in psychological warfare, Eugene Dawn, reporting to the Department of Defense during the bombing of Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1960s and early 1970s. The story may be read profitably as the confession of "a sick man" (1974/1982, p.32). Dawn is doing what he can, making use of the resources available to him, in an attempt to put together a "core" for himself, albeit late in life at the age of thirty-three. How are we meant to understand

Dawn's use of the term "core?" The extent to which the core is predicated on "a core belief" (p. 9) takes us beyond the narrator's confessional mode of address to the central discursive formation of the novella.

The story is rooted in a particular discursive context—in which *Middlemarch*, with George Eliot's Casaubon as the seeker of the "Key to All Mythologies," may be seen as the canonical literary reference—alongside the more explicit interface of cultural anthropology and the American military. Edward Said (1989) identifies the link between anthropology and the U.S. Department of Defense; similarly, David Attwell (1993, pp. 40-41) provides a more immediate link between the Hudson Institute studies on national security and international order—*Can We Win in Vietnam? The American Dilemma* (Armbruster, Gastil, Kahn, Pfaff, & Stillman, 1968)—and Dawn's report. The core of the narrative is contained in the report, which provides a fictive overlap with the psychoanalysis of persecutory anxiety (Klein, 1946). As such, the narrative voice figures as a self-conscious textual elaboration in a particular genre of modern thought, which extends from the work of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century mythographers through theosophy to religious anthropology, archaeology, and psychoanalysis (Kidd, 2016).

The psychopathology of character is overdetermined by the discourse of mythography, which drives the "negative work" of the narrative (Green, 1999). A "bookish child," a child who grew up with books of all kinds, Dawn sees himself now "in an honourable line of bookish men who have sat in libraries and had visions of great clarity" (1974/1982, p. 29). The delusional quality of this so-called "clarity" is expressed in his view of futurity as will to power: "I speak with the voice of things to come. I speak in troubled times and tell you how to be as children again. I speak to the broken halves of all our selves and tell them to embrace" (pp. 29-30).

Whose voice do we hear in Dawn's address? Who is the author of these vatic words? Who speaks in the will to power? The biblical cadence of these exhortations is clear enough; indeed, the voice of Scripture is an integral part of Coetzee's fiction from *Dusklands* onwards. In a body of work that is uniquely recognizable for its series of abject characters, Coetzee demonstrates a complex and ambivalent relation to his own experience of Dutch Reformed Calvinism. Vincent Pecora points out that Coetzee's work comprises simultaneously "a furious attack on and an inescapable reproduction of the Dutch Reformed Calvinism of his tribe" (2015, p. 92). Paradoxically, the repudiation of Dutch Calvinism is driven by a sense of "shame" that is rooted in "the spirit of Geneva" (Coetzee, 1990, p. 47). The repudiation, in other words, may be seen as a re-enactment of a confessional worldview that appears as deeply entrenched in Coetzee as in any able Christian of good faith: "The generation of white South Africans to which I belong, and the next generation, and perhaps the generation after that too, will go bowed under the shame of the crimes that were committed in their name" (2007b, p. 44).

How is this ambivalent, shameful attitude played out in the course of the novels? What form does the torment take? In "The Vietnam Project," the conventional preoccupations of fictional realism—i..e., the psychology of character, first-person present-tense narrative, documentary verisimilitude, and so on—give place to an entirely different use of narrative voice. We need to decouple the terms "personal" and "inward" in order to understand the delusional core of "The Vietnam Project." The story rests on the fictional interface of counter-will, on the one hand, and the subtle variation on counter-myth, on the other. Mythography, Dawn's declared field of expertise and operation, is presented as "an open field like philosophy or criticism because it has not yet found a methodology to lose itself

forever in the mazes of" (1974/1982, p. 31). The "open field" and the "will to power" may be seen as mutually dependent discursive conditions of Dawn's modern revisionary counter-myth. The latter is aimed at "resistant subjectivities" (Caygill, 2013), the "wheel of rebellious violence" (1974/1982, p. 27) in the *psyche* and *ethos* of the insurgent population. Re-visioning expresses the totalitarian reach of the mythographic system of thought, extending the ideal of an integrated core to the world at large.

II. The Violence of the *Copula*

Dawn's report states emphatically that the "highest propaganda is the propagation of a new mythology" (1974/1982, p. 25). This involves above all the formation of a new "voice," a resolute, post-Cartesian "voice" forged in a strategic military alliance between the law of the father and the co-opted brother-voices of the Vietnamese. The counter-myth is deployed as a form of radio propaganda aimed at "the psychic reflexes built into traditional Vietnamese culture" (Attwell, 1993, p. 43). The actualization of the myth, however, lies beyond psychological warfare in the will to power as total war. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that the delusional quality of Dawn's counter-myth blurs the distinction between violence and the voice. The idea that psychosis issues from language itself, indeed from a delirious version of "our word is our bond," brings us to the heart of the matter.

War generates its own madness. The father-voice, for instance, "utters itself appropriately out of the sky. The Vietnamese call it 'the whispering death' when *it speaks* from the B-52s, but there is no reason why it should not ride the radio waves with equal devastation" (1974/1982, p. 21, emphasis added). The voice thus embodies the inherent violence of the *copula* that pertains in the devitalized relations of imperialist warfare and its totalitarian ambition. Dawn articulates a thoroughly

disenchanted worldview along these lines, not least of all in his delusional lament for the enemy. He pours out his destructive hatred of the enemy as a projection of his own despair: "We could have loved them: our hatred for them grew only out of broken hopes. We brought them our pitiable selves, trembling on the edge of inexistence, and asked only that they acknowledge us. We brought with us weapons, the gun and its metaphors, the only copulas we know of between ourselves and our objects" (p. 17).

As Coetzee aims to make clear in *Dusklands*, the violence of the *copula* determines the conditions of its own erasure; it continually repeats the reach for meaning within the solipsistic limits of its own metaphors of power, even as it "probes reality" and the object-world: "We cut their flesh open, we reached into their dying bodies…hoping to be washed in their blood…We forced ourselves deeper than we had ever gone before into their women; but when we came back we were still alone" (p. 180). Dawn's manic lament reveals the nihilistic depths of his desperate search for "transcendent" meaning in a thoroughly disenchanted world. As we shall see, Coetzee describes the same underlying pattern of nihilism in both stories: the disenchantment of "broken hopes"; a "tragic reach for transcendence" (p. 18); and the final recourse to genocidal violence as a type of repetition compulsion. In answer to the question that I posed concerning Dawn's address, it turns out that violence speaks in the will to power; indeed, it is not a question of "who speaks" so much as "it speaks."

III. The Age of Athene

How is war waged here? There has been a tendency in the critical commentaries on *Dusklands* to emphasize either psychological warfare (Gallagher, 1991; Attwell, 1993) or military force (Attridge, 2004). I find this dichotomy is

misleading. Psychology gives place to the "technical" problem of "victory" (1974/1982, p. 28) but only in conjunction with the formation of a counter-myth to the prevailing myth of the rebellion of the sons against the tyrant father in Vietnamese consciousness. The strategic aim is to counter the prevailing myth, penetrating the enemy on both fronts by force and persuasion. In the midst of his manic discourse, Dawn clearly acknowledges that total war encompasses "a political air-war whose purpose is to destroy the enemy's capacity to sustain himself psychically" (p. 28). The apocalyptic core of genocide is consolidated at the interface of *mythos* and *technē*. In the myth of rebellion, as Dawn describes it, the alliance formed against the tyrannical father involves an incestuous conspiracy between mothers and sons. Dawn's report thus "owes much more to the notion of the 'primal horde' in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* than to any respectable ethnographic description of Viet Cong or South Vietnamese traditions" (Attwell, 1993, p. 43).

In claiming his authority from the "science of mythography," Dawn concludes that revision is a more effective tactic than replacement. He eschews the identification of America with the voice of the father, and evokes instead the "age of Athene" as a re-visioning of Vietnamese consciousness. The stage is set for victory along the related axes of disciplined, strategic war and total demoralization. On the one hand, the virgin goddess of war strategy outplays both the earth goddess and the band of brothers in a violent spectacle of total war: "In the Indo-China Theatre we play out the drama of the end of the tellurian age and the marriage of the sky-god with his parthenogene daughter-queen" (1974/1982, p. 26). The goddess of *technē*, on the other hand, is evoked alongside a covert program of political assassination, a brutal assault intent above all on rendering the enemy less than human. The counter-myth is realized only at the point of absolute degradation, where force penetrates beyond the

community as a whole to each member. Individuals cease to be humans, but are marked out rather to die as cattle.

The delirium of genocidal violence reaches its crescendo in a "blinding moment of ascending meta-historical consciousness" (p. 26), which is reflected in the hideous image of a "scurrying swarm" of vermin vibrating only "to the coming of death." In a dark allegory of reading, the madness that would impose order on chaos—i. e., through the violence of metaphor—is rendered articulate as post-religious myth, even as Dawn breaks down and is committed to a mental hospital. Based on inchoate fragments of anthropological thought, bits and pieces culled from the modern attempt at mythmaking, the fiction nonetheless persists—again, through the violence of the *copula*—as a nihilistic, devitalizing force. The "tragic reach for transcendence" goes beyond the pathetic mind that gave shape to it; nor is the author himself exempt from the desperate attempt to avoid falling into the abject "place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva, 1980/1982, p. 2). By describing the tragic pattern of self-consciousness in these terms, Coetzee implicates himself, as well as his modern, secular readers, in the same dilemma: shame drives an interminable wish to be redeemed in an irrevocably disenchanted world.

IV. The Colonial Archive

Dusklands presents the nihilistic delusions of power in the form of myths and fables, which inevitably involves encounters with archives. The same basic maneuver is employed in both stories, rendering the will to power by reworking the archive as a pliable discursive phenomenon rather than an objective historical record. Attwell treats this reworking as a form of "parody," which he sees as the principal critical maneuver in both stories (1993, p. 35). As we have seen, the "parodied documents" in "The Vietnam Project" issue from the military bureaucracy in a strategic alliance with

the Department of Defense. In "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," the parodic reworking applies to the documents of colonial expansion and pioneer history published by the Van Riebeeck Society (VRS) in South Africa (see Bradlow, 1978). In his recourse to these accounts, Coetzee describes himself following "the fortunes of the Hottentots in a history written not by them but for them, from above, by travelers and missionaries, not excluding my remote ancestor Jacobus Coetzee, *floruit* 1760" (1984/1992, p. 52).

Coetzee constructs his fictional account of events around the historical details presented in these colonial travel narratives. The eighteenth-century journal of Carel Frederik Brink, for instance, provides many of the geographical details in the first part of "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" (see Mossop, 1947). Brink, who was the official cartographer and scribe on the 1761-1762 expedition to Namaqualand, also describes the death of "a Great Nama" who accompanied Jacobus Coetzee during his first expedition in 1760. Coetzee reworks this account into one of the two versions of the servant's death (1974/1982, pp. 93-94); the second version, in which Jacobus Coetzee abandons his dying servant, appears to be an alternative reworking from the eighteenth-century narrative of William Paterson (Forbes & Rourke, 1980, p. 152).

The two versions of the servant's death draw our attention to the fictional nature of the archive and its reworkings. But what do we mean by "reworking"? Like Attwell, Susan Gallagher (1991, p. 77) counts the various textual and bibliographical aspects of the novella as a "parody" of the Van Riebeek Society. I think this is useful as far as it goes; but it seems to me that we need a more comprehensive term than "parody" for Coetzee's treatment of history and historiography. There is something more disturbing beneath the mockery in Coetzee's tone, something more lacerating than a satirical imitation: a work of cruelty that amounts to more than a parody of the

colonial archive. I propose we use the Freudian notion of "working-through" (*Durcharbeitung*) not, in this case, as a type of psychical work, but rather, as a critical aspect of the inner workings of fiction. I think "working-through" is a good example of the productive overlap between psychoanalysis and literary fiction.

I should like, at this point, to make a further distinction between Coetzee's explicit concern with the colonial archive and his implicit response to apartheid—indeed, a response that includes assembling "the archival record of the unnameable" (Derrida, 1983/2007, p. 377). I suggest that the explicit concern contains the implicit response. Thus, in the structure as well as the thematic preoccupations of the narrative, Coetzee demonstrates the extent to which the history of the present rests not only on eighteenth-century colonial travel narratives but also, more importantly, on the contribution of the Afrikaners who shaped these narratives into myths and fables in the name of history. Unlike Peter Knox-Shaw (1982), I do not think we can maintain a hard and fast distinction here between authentic historical documents and fictitious texts. The novelist achieves his "critical intentions with respect to white nationalism" (Attwell, 1993, p. 45), precisely by problematizing the authority of the archive.

The consequent disruption of history and narrative alike serves as a basic metafictional technique in Coetzee's novels: the single identifiable authorial voice of the classic realist text is displaced by a plurality of narrative voices with no discernible arbiter. In effect, the authorial voice inscribes an abject blankness in its place, and as such the novelist finds himself implicated in a particular formation of absence. I take it that this is what Pecora means when he refers to "the modern *saeculum*, the world of disgrace or the absence of grace, inhabited by Coetzee's characters and I think by Coetzee as well…it is hard not to think…that Coetzee thinks

of himself…as someone who must, especially after apartheid, live in abjection, someone who must live in a state without grace" (2015, pp. 87-88).

The disgraced life is Coetzee's central theme, but it is also the predicament in which he finds himself. This reading is based on the extent to which Coetzee treats history not as a dispassionate object of concern but rather works the very afflictions of history into the structure of the novella. History figures above all as a burden, something one constantly carries, constructs and reconstructs. Fiction is used, accordingly, as a means of working-through the shame of colonial and post-colonial violence. As a white South African writer, Coetzee inherits the legacy of Jacobus Coetzee in conjunction with the Afrikaner myth of history (see Gallagher, 1991, pp. 24-31).

Again, the structure of the novella reveals the extent to which the legacy is inseparable from the myth. The novella includes a translation by one J.M. Coetzee of Jacobus Coetzee's Dutch narrative, together with an Introduction to the narrative by the translator's father, Dr. S.J. Coetzee. The emphases in the Introduction are consistent with the ideology of Christian nationalism that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s in South Africa. The Introduction thus reflects the conservative and authoritarian perspective of Afrikaner history; it represents the discursive violence that Coetzee brings to the fore through the work of editing and translation. Furthermore, the archive reveals the degree to which the novelist and the historian are equally implicated in the reworkings of historical narrative. It is incumbent on the historian as well as the novelist to engage with the fictions by which we construct and make sense of reality. Once again, Coetzee does not place himself above the fray with regard to the unwarranted interference in the historical record. He has consistently

maintained “that history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse…that history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other” (1988, p. 4).

V. Afrikaner Calvinism

The central achievement of *Dusklands* consists in rendering brutality in its own voice. Violence speaks for itself in the colonial archive as a type of anxiety, revealing the identity of *psyche* and *logos* in the genocidal will to power. Jacobus Coetzee’s narrative begins with the anxiety of self-identity set against the background of a shift in the economic and political relations of white settlement: “who is to say who copies whom? In hard times how can differences be maintained? We pick up their way of life, following beasts around, as they pick up ours…and soon you carry the Hottentot smell with you” (1974/1982, p. 57). The anxiety evidently relates to the conflict between Khoisan and Boers (burghers reduced to trekkers) over land and cattle. Coetzee does not deny the enormous importance of economic pressure and the exigencies of money. At the same time, he demonstrates the extent to which economic conflict is overdetermined by racism, including the virulent anxiety of difference and its maintenance.

The political economy of colonialism operates in conjunction with a complex discursive relationship of forces that is driven by an inner narrative of anxiety. The arrangement is maintained on theological-political grounds with respect to an absolute division between the elect, those chosen or set apart by God for salvation, and the irreligious horde: “The one gulf that divides us from the Hottentots is our Christianity” (p. 57). Jacobus Coetzee’s narrative itself is an overdetermined expression of self-consciousness, a racist myth of history, and a theological justification of genocidal violence. The violence of frontier terror is pivotal. Coetzee holds nothing back in denying himself an authorial voice. Indeed, readers have taken

exception to the depiction of violence in this story, seeing it as a type of collusion with barbarism (see Know-Shaw, 1982). Salman Rushdie condemned Coetzee's *Disgrace* on similar grounds, maintaining that the novel "merely becomes part of the darkness it describes" (2003, p. 340). I do not share this view of Coetzee's fiction. For me the critical value of the novels—including, *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and *Disgrace*—depends on the self-disclosure of violence without reserve.

There is no question that, in addition to the novels I have just mentioned, *Dusklands* is an extremely brutal work. Whereas Dawn breaks down under the pressure of his own catastrophic disillusionment, Jacobus Coetzee assumes the burden of history through his delirious appropriation of divine sanction. This involves a desperate, and ultimately futile, attempt to articulate the so-called modern mind in a world that is haunted by the absence of God. Fragments of modern philosophical and theological thinking are yoked together in the form of a violent fable of redemption. A post-Cartesian sense of self-consciousness is anxiously identified throughout the narrative with the "destiny" of God's chosen people *contra* the "empty word" of the uncivilized. In this context, Calvinism provided the Afrikaners with the basic ideological terms for the division of the elect and the heathens: the identification of themselves as a Chosen People in opposition to the indigenous peoples of South Africa. It also provides Coetzee with a plausible, if shameful, answer to the question of how one might justify evil in the light of God's goodness, a response that haunts the novels from *Dusklands* onwards.

The nationalistic sense of identity in Afrikaner Calvinism is couched in terms of a "sacred calling" (De Klerk, 1975, p. 233), which, as Gallagher points out, involves modelling Afrikaner history on the history of Israel: "The Great Trek is

another Exodus to the Promised Land…The Day of the Covenant marks God's seal of approval for the Afrikaner tribe and its annihilation of the indigenous people" (1991, p. 30). It is important to emphasize that the model does not rule against anti-Semitism as an extension of racism in South Africa. Jews were in fact excluded from the National Party in South Africa up until 1951 and, historically, Afrikaner theological nationalism (Templin, 1984) functions as a specific amalgamation of ancient Israel's biblical epic—the conquest of the land of Canaan, the wanderings in the wilderness (interior), the promise of land made to Abraham—and the modernity of self-consciousness as will to power.

Accounts differ regarding the Calvinist foundations of Afrikaner nationalism and racist ideology. Sheila Patterson (1957), F.A. Van Jaarsveld (1964), W.A. De Klerk (1975), T. Dunbar Moodie (1975), and others argue that Afrikaner history was first modelled on the Old Testament narrative in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, whereas Irving Hexham (1981) and André Du Toit (1983) date the self-identification of the Boers as a Chosen People later, to the second half of the nineteenth-century. J. Alton Templin (1984, p. 8), however, points out that the ideas of "election" and "destiny" were rooted in the colonial notion of "nationhood" and the accompanying expressions of popular piety prior to the systematic appropriation of theology for racist and nationalist purposes. In any event, Afrikaner political theology "inspires its militants with an original form of antisemitism…the 'Hebrwistic' mythology of the Boer people, coming out of its nomadic origins and the Great Trek, excludes any other 'Chosen People'" (Derrida, 1983/2007, p. 384).

VI. Appropriated Freedom

Situated in this overdetermined context, "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" reveals the complex inner workings of violence, particularly in terms of the

relationship between the narrative voice and the narrative function. Jacobus Coetzee's insistence that the blacks are "not like us" (1974/1982, p. 59) is repeated as a condition of possibility in each and every act of brutality that follows. As we shall see, the narrative itself describes and seeks to justify hideous acts of physical violence on theological grounds. Further, S.J. Coetzee's Introduction extends the discursive reach of violence in the form of a fable—namely, the fable of the White man in South Africa. The mediation of the voice thus systematizes the violence of the Cogito, coupled with an anti-Semitic reworking of Israel's epic, as the founding moment of the colonial fable: "The generations of the Coetzees illustrate well the gradual dispersal into the hinterland…trekking ever northward in anger or disgust at the restrictiveness of government, Dutch or British" (pp. 108-109).

Set against the background of the Great Trek into the interior at the beginning of the nineteenth-century (in response to British imperialist domination of the Cape), and the Anglo-Boer war at the end of the century, Afrikaners increasingly identified themselves as a persecuted, but ultimately heroic and triumphant "tribe" (Coetzee, 1986). The fable of the White man in South Africa supports this identification on theological grounds, where "destiny" is expressed as an ideal of appropriated freedom. By "appropriated freedom" I mean a type of inner violence in which the Afrikaners appropriate the "savage" and "abandoned" freedom of the blacks by identification. The ideal serves multiple purposes: faced with the indignity of British rule, on the one hand, and the defiance of the blacks, on the other, the Afrikaners, as S. J. Coetzee boasts, "believe in justice but have never taken gladly to laws" (1974/1982, p. 109).

The narrative embodies this so-called "anarchic" attitude in a thoroughly ambivalent respect. On the one hand, we are left in no doubt about the "freedom"

exercised by the "creators of a People…lost in the veld/but for another Canaan elected" (J. D. du Toit, "Totius," as cited in Hexham, 1981, p. 37). Jacobus Coetzee thus asserts that the Bushman is an animal to be hunted; that one's own humanity is measured against the slaughter of something that is less than human. On the other hand, the slaying of the Bushman may be read as a primal myth of self-laceration, a colonial reworking of Nietzsche's parable of the madman, who comes looking for God and then announces that we have killed Him: "God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!" (1887/2001, p. 120) Jacobus Coetzee, straddling the gulf of abjection, has blood on his hands from the beginning, while his delirium carries the echo of Nietzsche's madman singing *requiem aeternam deo* in the face of an "empty word."

Coetzee does not spare the reader any more than he spares himself in describing how Bushman girls offer a further opportunity for the precarious realization of colonial authority and self-identity: "a wild Bushman girl is tied into nothing, literally nothing. She may be alive but she is as good as dead. She has seen you kill the men who represented power to her, she has seen them shot down like dogs. You have become Power itself now and she nothing, a rag you wipe yourself on and throw away. She is completely disposable. She is something for nothing, free" (1974/1982, p. 61). The word "free"—uttered in the final sentence as a wholly perverse presupposition of annihilator anxiety—means nothing more than "free" to violate. Rape thus figures simultaneously as an act of self-consciousness, an expression of God's plan, and the paradigmatic instance of power itself as appropriated freedom. It is also the grounds for a corrosive disavowal in which disgrace silently and repeatedly undoes the violator.

VII. Abjection

The unrelenting violence of the colonial narrative turns on this defining encounter with nothingness, in which the violation of "the freedom of the abandoned" functions as a twofold projection—including, an appropriation of the freedom of the "wild Bushman girl" and an attribution to the uncivilized blacks of an inner discourse of forsakenness. This seems to me an especially significant instance of the implicit overlap between *Dusklands* and psychoanalysis. Coetzee himself does not approach the world in terms of psychological states of mind. Nevertheless, colonial historiography may be seen as a type of projection (Klein, 1946), a defensive narrative maneuver against the specter of the "empty word." In this case, the archival figure of the "unnameable" takes the form of what I call a devitalized illusion, manifest as such in the fictional movement of self-consciousness: from the perception of "the established soul" (1974/1982, p. 72), at the outset of Jacobus Coetzee's narrative, to the subsequent delirium of power under the pressure of its own destructiveness and brutality.

On his first expedition in 1760, following a somewhat panicked departure from the "strange Hottentots," Jacobus Coetzee wakes early the next morning with a fever and, in an attempt to minister to his needs, the servants take him back to the camp. His delirium gathers and intensifies *en route* as he listens to the voices that come to him: "There were two voices, one near, one far" (p. 75). Subject to an interminable, aporetic call from both "near" and "far"—an internally divided summons in which reconciliation with the interior is in conflict with the authoritarian order of "civilized barbarism" (Derrida, 1983/2007, p. 386)—the violence of the Cogito turns inward, defending itself in the form of delirious voices intent on preserving its untouchability: "I carried my secret buried within me. I could not be touched" (1974/1982, p. 75). Jacobus Coetzee's "secret" anticipates the "great secret"

of Coetzee's schooldays, his scandalous, if somewhat arbitrary decision to become a Roman Catholic (see Coetzee, 1997, p. 18).

If we accept that brutality is its own commentary, this still leaves the question of the addressee. To whom does "it" speak? The full extent of the disgraced life becomes apparent only when we take account of the addressee. The "untouchable" subject of power is overwhelmed by a paranoid encounter with the state of abjection into which the other has been cast. Again, I think there is a notable overlap here with psychoanalysis, in this case, Julia Kristeva's (1980/1982) pre-primitive phenomenology of abjection, where the drives correlate the not-yet-conceived ego with a non-object. The want-to-be (prior to the object world) is thus disclosed as the groundless ground of the subject. An inner exclusion issues from the latter in the virulent form of maternal hatred devoid of the paternal *logos*, an "empty word" set up in the absence of God.

The abject is neither subject nor object but a radically excluded remnant, a surviving foreign trace inscribed within the movement of consciousness itself. In the narrator's own words, abjection looms up in terms of "the void dressed up as being" (1974/1982, p. 101). It demarcates the place where the reach for meaning comes face to face with its own catastrophic collapse. Something irreducibly repulsive, some disgusting foreign body, gets under the skin of the subject, in response to which the colonial fable offers a final solution on theologico-political grounds. The central drama of abjection and redemption, the loss of grace together with the ineradicable longing for a permanently foreclosed salvation, is played out as a violent spectacle of purification. The latter extends to the point of annihilation in Jacobus Coetzee's narrative.

VIII. The Delirium of Jacobus Coetzee

Coetzee addresses his delirious "sermons" to his servant, Jan Klawer—"good, faithful old Jan Klawer." In the event, the qualities of "goodness" and "faithfulness" prove inadequate to compete with the hallucinated visions of power, which threaten to subsume the master as well as the servant. In the interminable "delirium upon delirium" of the forsaken life, the servant's incomprehension (Klawer does not seem to understand a word that is said to him) doubles his master's anxieties in the face of a "long-absent God" (1974/1982, p. 76). Consequently, self-consciousness is engaged in a compulsive act of violence, repeatedly purifying the abject, in a desperate attempt to ward off the collapse of the "I am" into the "I am dying" (*sum moribundus*).

The delirious thinking that underpins the narrative occupies a pivotal position between the so-called modern mind ("I am"), on the one hand, and the mirror image of its own abjection, on the other. The latter takes the form of an "object" that appears from the beginning to be "as good as dead." As such, delirium forms the colonial counterpart to the apocalyptic core of genocide in Dawn's imperialist counter-myth. In both cases, the Cogito's own "negligible phantoms" (p. 18) and perverse figures reach no further than the murderous energies of an interminable claustration (Meltzer, 1992/2008). Sequestered in the menstruation hut (the place of abjection) in a state of degradation and irredeemable shame, Coetzee meditates upon his life in a series of delirious thoughts: ranging from "the explorer's hammer blow" levelled at the "interior" to various thoughts concerning dreams, the alterity of the other and the object-world, and the spatial relations of master and savage. In a grotesque reworking of Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the anxiety that drives these thoughts concerns the nature of thinking itself, the hideous possibility that there is no reality to probe and violate, no freedom to appropriate, nothing to the lure of rape or the enticement to penetrate, other than mere fictions and fables.

As analysts, we will be familiar with patients whose exhaustive obsessional maneuvers are played out on the edge of a despair that threatens to become all-consuming. Our more disturbed obsessive patients, therefore, continue to wander the interior on the threshold of the object world or, as Kristeva puts it, at the limit of primal repression: "On such limits and at the limit one could say that there is no unconscious, which is elaborated when representations and affects (whether or not tied to representations) shape a logic" (1980/1982, pp. 10-11). Coetzee's protagonists come up with different versions of this abject re-enactment, different ways of dealing with the excess of the persecutory object. On the one hand, in an increasingly desperate attempt to ward off unthinkable anxieties, Dawn scrabbles after fragments of anthropological thought. Jacobus Coetzee, on the other hand, stakes his claim on history grounded in God's judgement, which, as he insists, "is just, irreprehensible, and incomprehensible" (1974/1982, p. 106).

Coetzee uses fiction to enact its own anxiety precisely at the intersection of our Cartesian modernity and our disgraceful exposure amidst the tombs and sepulchres of God. The two stories in *Dusklands* are equally haunted by the following questions: How do we know there is anything more to the world than the features we ascribe to it? How can we ever be absolutely certain that our senses are not deceiving us, that we are not dreaming? And is there any guarantee that our convictions are not the result of a demon at work in our minds? The responses available in answer to these questions, as well as the questions themselves, depend on particular historical horizons of intelligibility. According to Coetzee, we are where we are without promise of grace and with an ineradicable longing for the transcendent. Writing from within, as well as about, the South African situation, Coetzee thus presents the anxiety of historiography, linking the rhetorical claustrophobia of the modern subject

to the writing of history. The Cartesian drama of self-consciousness is reworked as a form of persecutory anxiety, in a desperate and despairing response to which colonial genocide offers a "last defense against isolation" (p. 79).

I do not think Coetzee would have us read *Dusklands* as an explanation of either colonialism or apartheid. He is concerned rather with fictions of inner violence and brutality, including the extremes to which "white writing" is prepared to go in its defense against intergenerational anxiety and shame. Nadine Gordimer (1988), Lewis Nkosi (1981), and others are critical of the way in which so-called experimental fiction and the South African *avant garde*, particularly the group of Afrikaans writers known as the "Sestigers," reduce history to a metaphysical game. A similar criticism could be levelled at Coetzee and his explicit commitment to the legacy of European literary modernism. His novels are certainly more experimental than realistic. And yet it seems to me that Coetzee turns the critical argument against itself, incorporating history and metaphysics alike into the inner workings of the colonial narrative. He does not start from the assumption that fiction has to measure up to the demands of history. On the contrary, history is seen as part of the problem rather than as an objective criterion by which deviations from literary realism and liberal humanist ideology may be found wanting.

Most importantly, through his use of narrative voice, Coetzee reveals the extent to which the defense against persecutory anxiety fails, and fails horribly, in its own terms. Driven to ever more brutal acts of violence, colonial mastery ends up with nothing to master. At the same time, it remains haunted by the nihilated remnants, or discarded rags, of its own projections. The abject, as Kristeva points out, "has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*" (1980/1982, p. 1). In this respect, the essential drama of colonialism, understood as an interminable work of

violent opposition, is summed up in the following statement: “I am not a Hottentot” (1974/1982, p. 95). In this terse announcement of his own solipsistic predicament, the narrator condemns himself through a negative fusion, that is, at the point where the “I am” and the “I am not” coalesce. The coalescence is a construct of colonial historiography, and as such remains embedded in the Afrikaner’s myth of history. The colonial archive reveals the extent to which thinking posits itself *in extremis* as an interminable form of persecutory anxiety, a discursive maneuver of white nationalist history haunted by the surviving remnants of its own brutality. The paranoid logic of that history, which is evident from the moment that the subject is faced with an “empty word” rather than another human being, is consolidated in the course of Jacobus Coetzee’s meditative delirium.

The retaliatory violence of the second expedition confirms the futility of colonial power, but otherwise adds nothing to what is already set out in the meditations. Taken together, Jacobus Coetzee’s delirious visions reveal the full extent of his fear that nothing will come of the will to power, save the endless pouring out of its own despair in yet more futile acts of cruelty. Most notably, in the central meditation on the alterity of the other, Coetzee identifies himself with the gun understood as a “metaphysical” principle—namely, as a “mediator” and means of “salvation.” The violence of the *copula*, which extends throughout *Dusklands*, accedes to the status of an onto-theological principle in Coetzee’s delirium, hence the figure of “the hare that pants out its life at one’s feet.” The death of the other is simultaneously the condition of one’s own integrity and the source of endless torment. The “death of the hare” is supposed to be a symbolic means of preservation, and as such constitutes the eschatological ideal of the inner narrative of violence. The fictional movement of consciousness aims to realize itself on these grounds: “The

death of the hare is the logic of salvation. For either he *was living* out there and *is dying* into a world of objects, and *I am* content; or he was living within me and would not die within me…the death of the hare is my metaphysical meat…The hare dies to keep my soul from merging with the world' (1974/1982, pp. 79-80, emphasis added). In the event, as we will see, the symbol and the principle alike prove insignificant.

IX. The Gospel of the Sparrow

In the second of the two expeditions that he describes in his narrative, Jacobus Coetzee relies on "the logic of salvation" for the "sermon" that he delivers before executing the servants who deserted him on the first expedition. He tells his servants that there is no requirement of God to be good, which is to say, we cannot merit anything from the hand of God, but yet we may ask not to be forgotten. Who authorizes these words and this deed? As Gallagher (1991, p. 68) points out, most of Jacobus Coetzee's biblical allusions refer to the Pentateuch, evoking a wrathful rather than a merciful God. Similarly, Templin (1984) argues that, contrary to orthodox Reformed thought, the assumption that Christ is prefigured in the Old Testament does not pertain in South Africa. However, the general state of affairs notwithstanding, it seems to me that Jacobus Coetzee's narrative presupposes a Christological dimension. I do not mean to diminish the severity of the narrative tone. In fact, the inner difficulty of disgrace actually deepens with the narrator's attempt to reconcile two traditions of Christian confession: Calvinist election and the New Beginning in Christ.

The Christological dimension augments the paranoid defense: for all who will live in Christ must suffer persecution, and yet this cannot take away God's gift of salvation and the saving of man from the power and penalty of sin. Coetzee's sermon is couched in the gospel of Matthew, and the message promises salvation not only for

the condemned "heathen," but more importantly for the evangelical so "afflicted" (Matt. 24.9): "And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved" (Matt. 10.22). The delirium persists in and through the act of saving, that is, where Jacobus Coetzee preaches the gospel of the sparrow to the deserters before pronouncing sentence of death over them: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father" (Matt. 10.29).

In this case, the "gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. 24.13) extends its reach no further than the anxiety of the subject having to come face to face with its own projection of nothingness. The intolerance of a no-thing, or loss of faith in the mystery of the "empty word," characterizes the inner workings of brutality as a type of megalomania. As Bion states, "actual murder is to be sought instead of the thought represented by the word 'murder'" (1965/1984, p. 82). The essential means of preserving oneself is no longer available in this parody of the Hegelian dialectic, where the figure of the other panting out its life at one's feet fails to stand up.

The contempt pours out of Jacobus Coetzee at this point in a final reckoning with an object world rendered abject by the unrestrained exercise of murderous power. Summing up his lot in a statement that is full of hatred and despair, the narrator describes how two condemned men, the Tamboer brothers, went as docile bodies to their death, "nonentities swept away on the tide of history;" how a third, Plaatje, "knew he was dead" and did not "bother to plead;" and how the last of the deserters, Adonis, "whom I had always suspected I would one day despise…panted at my feet" (1974/1982, p. 101). In a final twist of persecutory logic, death cannot be pronounced over those who are already as good as dead: "this abject, treacherous

rabble was telling me that here and everywhere else on this continent there would be no resistance to my power and no limit to its projection" (p. 101).

Fearing the specter of the "undifferentiated plenum"—the fate that he assumes awaits him and his fellow "countrymen"—Jacobus Coetzee can count on the deserters neither alive nor dead. As far as he is concerned, they have proved themselves "inadequate" to the onto-theological strictures of power; their deaths have failed to body forth the object world in the manner of God's good creatures, the dead hare and the fallen sparrow. Consequently, salvation degenerates into the prospect of eternal punishment on the grounds that "[t]here was nothing that could be impressed on these bodies, nothing that could be torn from them or forced through their orifices, that would be commensurate with the desolate infinity of my power over them" (pp. 101-102). While the estimate of defiance is grossly askew, it nonetheless stands as a defining statement of the disgraced life, according to which the value of nothing—understood as an "optimum expectation" (Grotstein, 2007, p. 325)—is no longer a vital part of reality.

X. Nihilism

What is Jacobus Coetzee going to do now? The question posed itself along these lines, under the heading of "apartheid," as the abject underside of postwar history. The word "apartheid" itself occupies inner and outer reality "like a concentration camp" (Derrida, 1983/2007, p. 378). Thus, according to the "logic" of his own testimony, there are no moves left for the racist evangelical explorer, save the static repetition of an enraged vision. The narrative has come full circle. In place of an ending, it repeats the exemplary and inaugural act of violation with which the colonial reach for meaning simultaneously announced and erased itself. The rape of Bushman girls is repeated in a scene of symbolic oral rape that remains among the

most barbarous passages in Coetzee: “I held the muzzle of my gun against [Adonis’s] forehead. ‘Stand up!’ His face was quite empty…I pushed the muzzle against his lips. ‘Take it’, I said. He would not take it. I stamped [on his chest]. His lips seeped blood, his jaw relaxed. I pushed the muzzle in till he began to gag. I held his head steady between my ankles…The shot sounded as minor as a shot fired into the sand” (1974/1982, p. 104).

The stark minimalism of the prose in this passage conveys the abyss of horror, the identification of the “empty word” with an “empty face.” At this point the narrative terminates in a series of anxious questions rather than an achieved end. The questions give voice to the repetitive spasms of violence that mark the resentful termini of colonial power. Thus, Jacobus Coetzee asks himself whether it is possible that he has killed something of “inestimable value.” The answer is predictable enough, even if the prediction is grotesque: the inscrutability of the Hottentots is seen as justification for their annihilation and for the disposal of the docile bodies of the servants. But does this amount to anything? Were the deaths of all these people worth anything? It is scandalous to raise the question of value in these terms, but in doing so we appreciate the comprehensive reach of the calculus of power. Again, it is essentially a question of “metaphysical meat,” the death of the other as a condition of the object world: “Through their deaths I…again asserted my reality” (p. 106). And in a compulsive effort to ward off the solipsism of his own “empty word” (the intolerance of nothingness as the horror of aloneness), the evangelical narrator assumes his “mission” by taking it upon himself “to be the one to pull the trigger.”

Identifying the self in this way with History leaves one final set of questions, in all probability the defining questions in a post-religious age: Can the avenger look forward to nothing but suffering? What does it mean to live without grace? The

narrator hastily dismisses the specter of his own death as a mere fiction only to reveal a yet more corrosive anxiety, namely, the impossibility of dying—the dying that comes from the life that one has lived, as distinct from simply perishing amidst the "undifferentiated plenum" and "nonentities" of history. Freedom to die one's own death is ruled out by the devitalized illusions of the evangelical butcher. Indeed, the devitalization is evident not only in the narrator's attitude towards the "impenetrable" interiority of the other, but also, more importantly, in his perception of his own superfluity and the overall senselessness of being. The delirium of Jacobus Coetzee reveals, above all, the extent to which living and dying have never been of any real concern or consequence to him.

Together with the narrator's inability to tolerate the "empty word" in its manifest unknowability, or to accept the interrupting presence of absence rather than falling into it, the narrative moves relentlessly and inexorably towards the dreadful realization that nothing matters. Imagination itself is brought low by the reality of colonialism and its unprecedented coarseness, the lowest of the low. As Jacobus Coetzee admits, the "failure of imagination before the void" (p. 102) is complete and horribly coherent. No meaning takes place here. The reach for meaning doesn't extend beyond "the catastrophic residues of a mind withdrawn from itself" (Grotstein, 2007, p. 323). The brutalization of the disgraced life thus extends from the *asthma* of the dying animal to the logic of salvation, the desolation of eternal punishment, and the static repetition of violence. And yet while the narrative voice is exhausted in this fourfold pattern of movement, the novella is not yet complete.

XI. The Colonial Fable

It remains for the historian to reclaim a life that would otherwise be committed to nihilism. The task falls to S.J. Coetzee as editor and author of the

afterword. The narrative is thus reworked as a fable that in its redemptive reach forms the counterpart to Dawn's mythology. The delirium, which drives the narrative voice to the point of meaninglessness, is deliberately excised on the level of narrative function. The reach for meaning is conveyed through the latter on the one hand as "a work of piety toward an ancestor" and on the other as a work of revisionist historiography levelled at the "distortions" that have compromised "our conception of the great age of exploration" (1974/1982, p. 108). This is one of a series of related excisions, which form an essential part of the novella and which Coetzee manages through a consistently subtle interplay of voice and function as different levels of narrative discourse. The combined work of piety and history constitutes the fable ("the outward story") of the White man in South Africa journeying ever northward into the interior. The disgraced life is haunted by "the failure of imagination" itself; it requires, therefore, "a positive act of imagination" (p. 109) in order to restore narrative meaning. An imaginative understanding of this particular white man—an "extraordinary man" (p. 121)—is presented as a fictional double, a mirror image, of the future that he had envisaged in his own imaginative understanding of the civilizing process.

The "imagination" unfolds as a work of violence in historiographical as well as fictional discourse, where the inner narrative of brutality is reworked retrospectively (together with the Calvinist origins of Afrikaner nationalism) as a fable of disobedience and redemptive reprimand. On the one hand, the ruthless exploitation of the interior is re-presented in terms of "a necessary loss of innocence," that is, on the model of man's shameful fall and punishment in Genesis, chapter 3. The archival record of nameless dread (Bion, 1970/1984, p. 46) is consistently authorized by Scripture: "The Company's men were only playing the role of the angel

with the flaming sword in this drama of God's creation" (1974/1982, p. 110). On the other hand, the evolution of the "herd" step by step towards "citizenship of the world" forms the other half of the fable, which rests on the Calvinist Protestant belief that Christ gave his life as a sacrifice for the elect so that they may be redeemed from their sin.

The doctrine of the Fall, coupled with the idea of God's protecting his people at the expense of others (favoring some over others), underpins the central maneuver of the narrative function. Jacobus Coetzee's journey north of the Great River, and his second expedition with Hendrik Hop, are thereby claimed for "the annals of exploration" (p. 12), while at the same time completely cleared of an any "genocidal" motives (p. 114). Based on providential theology, and combined with the assumption that "Man's thrust into the future *is* history" (p. 12, emphasis added), the fable of the White man in South Africa is presented as a redemptive work of revision on an epic scale. The endeavor repeatedly comes to nothing: yoked together as a combined work of history and theology, the colonial fable continually undoes itself through its own murderous energies.

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